

Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

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## **Inquiry into the recognition of unpaid carers**

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into the recognition of unpaid carers in Australia.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community, and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care. Our member organisations work closely with children, young people, and their families, many of whom are experiencing vulnerabilities and are supported by unpaid carers in the form of family members, kinship and foster carers, and young carers.

### **The value of unpaid care**

Unpaid care work is essential to the social and economic wellbeing of individuals, families, and societies.<sup>1</sup> Australians make many valuable unpaid care contributions to our country, such as caring for children, caring for family members and volunteer work. Our work and caring commitments may change over the course of our lives, but some of these will be measured and valued, while others are not.<sup>2</sup> The work of unpaid carers in Australia is significantly undervalued.<sup>3</sup> Some forms of care are undervalued by way of underpayment, namely formal foster and kinship care arrangements.<sup>4</sup> Failing to measure and monitor social production contributions suggests that our society does not value these as highly as the paid work that contributes to a nation's healthy GDP – even though social production has an estimated economic value of more than \$287 billion.<sup>5</sup> All care work, paid or unpaid, adds value to the economy and should therefore be included in a country's economic calculations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market, 2016, <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/australian-unpaid-care-work-and-the-labour-market.pdf>, pg. 3

<sup>2</sup> University of Sydney, A Contributing Life: A Snapshot of the Value of Social Production, February 2023, [https://www.sydney.edu.au/content/dam/corporate/documents/brain-and-mind-centre/mwi-social-production\\_final\\_280223.pdf](https://www.sydney.edu.au/content/dam/corporate/documents/brain-and-mind-centre/mwi-social-production_final_280223.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Roadmap: The National Care and Support Economy Strategy 2023, Economic impact of care and support, < <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/draft-national-strategy-care-and-support-economy/economic-impact-care-support> >

<sup>4</sup> Larissa H, Careful Digital Kinship: Understanding Multispecies Digital Kinship, 2022 Choreographies of Care and Older Adults During the Pandemic in Australia, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcac008>>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> SIDA, Quick Guide to What and How: Unpaid Care Work, The benefits of reducing women's unpaid care work, pg. 2, <https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida61314en-quick-guide-to-what-and-how-unpaid-care-work.pdf>

Currently, more than 2.65 million Australians are engaged in unpaid care work.<sup>7</sup> The demand for care work worldwide will likely increase in the future, and it is the unpaid care performed by women that will largely be meeting this need.<sup>8</sup>

Formal and informal carers play a vital role in supporting Australia's health, mental health, aged care, disability support and social services systems.<sup>9</sup> While the definition of unpaid care work, or informal care, includes domestic duties such as housecleaning, it also includes taking care of children, an unwell or elderly family member, a family member with disability, and voluntary community work.<sup>10</sup> The *Carer Recognition Act 2010* (Cth) (the Act) aims to raise awareness about the important role of caring in society, and stipulates that all carers should have equal rights, including children and young people who are carers. However, the Act fails to recognise the full scope and diverse experiences of carers or reflect the need for unpaid or informal care to be seen as a valuable social production contribution in communities.

By redefining the Australian policy definitions of work to include the forms of productive, but unpaid care work undertaken by Australians, the value of that work in this country could be raised.<sup>11</sup>

### **The needs of specific cohorts such as young carers, First Nations carers, LGBTIQ+ carers, or culturally and linguistically diverse carers**

Studies conducted in Australia and overseas indicate that, even though many young carers (under the age of 25) value their job as carers and their capacity to provide care, caring for others can have a significant impact on a young person's physical, emotional, social, and psychological welfare, now and in the future.<sup>12</sup>

Our members support children and young people with a wide range of caring responsibilities, including caring for those facing mental health challenges, disability, chronic illness, alcohol and other drug substance abuse challenges, and the elderly. Each caring responsibility comes with a unique set of obligations and demands. This diversity of care results in a wide range of indicators and consequences, with young carers more often experiencing disadvantage than their peers and feeling like they are different from their peers.<sup>13</sup> Almost thirteen percent of children with a mental health caring responsibility aged 5 to 14 do not attend school.<sup>14</sup> This is a disturbing statistic. Being a young carer can have a significant impact on children and young people's life trajectories.

Young carers have been described as 'invisible carers' in Australian society.<sup>15</sup> Quality contemporary data on the experiences of young carers is limited. To bring visibility to the important role that young carers play in

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Informal Carers*, September 2021, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/informal-carers>>

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Charmes, *The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market: An analysis of time use data based on the latest World Compilation of Time-use Surveys*, International Labour Office, 2019, pg. 3 <[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms\\_732791.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_732791.pdf)>

<sup>9</sup> Carers Victoria, Media Release: Recognition of unpaid carers finally in the spotlight, June 2023, <https://www.carersvictoria.org.au/latest-news/media-release-recognition-of-unpaid-carers-finally-in-the-spotlight>

<sup>10</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market*, 2016, pg. 3 <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/australian-unpaid-care-work-and-the-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Elise Klein, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Submission to the Senate Select Committee in Work and Care, 2023

<sup>12</sup> University of South Australia, *Young carers and their engagement with education: 'No space in my brain to learn'*, 2019, [https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Young-Carers-Report-FINAL\\_vsmall\\_compressed1.pdf](https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Young-Carers-Report-FINAL_vsmall_compressed1.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Griffith University, *Young Carers in Australia Project 2021: A summary of key findings and recommendations*,

<sup>14</sup> Smiling Mind Australia, *The economic value of informal mental health caring in Australia*, 2016, [http://helpingminds.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Mind\\_Value-of-Informal-MH-Caring\\_Full-Report\\_v7.pdf](http://helpingminds.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Mind_Value-of-Informal-MH-Caring_Full-Report_v7.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> University of South Australia, *Young carers and their engagement with education: 'No space in my brain to learn'*, 2019 [https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Young-Carers-Report-FINAL\\_vsmall\\_compressed1.pdf](https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Young-Carers-Report-FINAL_vsmall_compressed1.pdf)

our society, their work must be recognised and measured so it can feed into government policy change for better outcomes.

Young women, young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and young First Nations people are more likely to be young carers.<sup>16</sup> It is important to consider the support needs of these specific groups and consider how they can be supported by government so that their commitment to providing care is not to their own disadvantage.

Kinship care in Australia is complex. Formal care of children who are unable to live with their families, as assessed by a statutory or child protection authority, is recognised by government and is subsidised. However, a large proportion of kinship care in Australia is informal, and therefore goes without the same level of support – financial and otherwise – that a formal kinship care arrangement would benefit from.<sup>17</sup> For First Nations kinship carers, there is a strong imperative to protect family from ‘the care system’, especially if it means children being cared for outside their extended family networks.<sup>18</sup> Disproportionally, this impacts First Nations women and girls, affecting their ability to access support, participate in the workforce, and take care of their own needs.

When children are unable to safely live with their families, and kinship care is not possible, foster carers provide temporary housing and care for children. Foster care is an essential component of the child protection and out of home care system, and across Australia, the system is in crisis.<sup>19</sup> Foster carers can provide respite care for families, emergency care, short- or long-term care, and therapeutic care for children with specific care needs.<sup>20</sup> These forms of care are unpaid. Foster care provides an estimated economic benefit to the Victorian community of \$80 million in 2.9 million hours of active care giving, and more than three times that amount in avoided costs of children being placed in alternative, state funded care.<sup>21</sup>

This very valuable resource that supports children when they need it the most is at risk. In the 2020-21 financial year, Victoria had the highest number of foster carers leave the system in the country, reportedly 580 in total.<sup>22</sup> This is indicative of the problems facing the out of home care system more broadly, meaning higher rates of children are placed in institutionalised care as a last available option.<sup>23</sup> It also represents an ongoing challenge for the sector in attracting and retaining foster carers.

Although foster and kinship care both attract a carer payment, this is generally insufficient to cover the basic costs associated with raising a child. Foster and kinship caring are still voluntary, providing an example of vital, but unpaid, care work. Lack of financial support combined with cost-of-living pressures for many families means that for some potential carers, who otherwise would like to be able to offer a safe and nurturing environment for a child in need, taking on foster care becomes a financial decision. It is not possible to provide good care if the carer cannot afford to do so.<sup>24</sup> In Victoria, less than two thirds of carers say they are likely to continue providing care in the future, and that the many challenges associated with foster caring, including financial difficulties, affect their sustainability as carers.<sup>25</sup> There is now an urgent need for a national approach to foster care, working closely with State and Territory governments and relevant peak bodies to develop more sustainable, contemporary and evidence-informed models and approaches.

<sup>16</sup> Carers Victoria, Young Carers Facts, 2017, <https://www.carersvictoria.org.au/media/1150/young-carer-facts-february-2017.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> ‘We’re just kids as well’: The experience and support needs of young kinship carers in Australia, Children and Youth Services Review, 2023, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740923001627?via%3Dihub>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> The Cube Group (unpublished), Valuing something that really matters – the economic value of foster care in Victoria’, March 2022

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pg. 10

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pg. 2

<sup>22</sup> The Guardian, ‘Australia’s kinship carers desperate for support as numbers of children in out-of-home care grow’, 28 May 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/may/28/australias-kinship-carers-desperate-for-support-as-numbers-of-children-in-out-of-home-care-grow>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, Response to Budget 2022, <https://www.fcav.org.au/news/response-to-budget-22-media-release>

<sup>25</sup> The Cube Group (unpublished), Valuing something that really matters – the economic value of foster care in Victoria’, March 2022, pg. 3

Unpaid care is a form of work.<sup>26</sup> Until this is formally measured and valued in Australia, carers – largely women – will continue to be negatively impacted, and unable to reach their full potential.

### **The importance of employment participation and gender equity**

All societies rely on care to grow and flourish.<sup>27</sup> The care of children in particular is the most common reason for the difference in formal workforce participation between men and women.<sup>28</sup> Women in Australia do more unpaid care work and less paid work relative to men than in most other countries. Though many women would like to be able return to paid work or be able to work more paid hours per week, they face significant barriers to participating more fully in the labour force.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, co-parents who would like to take on caring roles are not always able to do so because of the lack of workplace flexibility.<sup>30</sup>

Flexible work arrangements are one of the most important determinants of a woman's successful return to the workplace.<sup>31</sup> Providing a supportive, flexible workplace environment, which allows employees to manage paid employment and their unpaid caring responsibilities, provides benefits for women, communities, and for the Australian economy.<sup>32</sup> For unpaid carers, particularly women, time away from the paid workforce means continually facing economic insecurity, and this can have impacts over their life course. For older unpaid carers (such as grandparents) this can mean experiencing poverty. Many grandparent carers are women who live below the poverty line, surviving on less than \$20,000 per year.<sup>33</sup> Women's workforce participation is the key to increased economic security for children, young people and families.

### **Recommendations for consideration:**

- Raise the profile of all carers, paid or unpaid carers, by raising the remuneration of paid caring roles and the rate of allowances for all carers, particularly foster and kinship carers.
- Launch a national public awareness campaign to promote knowledge and acknowledgement of the pivotal role of carers in Australian society, increasing resources and supports for those providing unpaid care.
- Invest in research and more frequent data collection so that the needs of unpaid carer cohorts, particularly young and First Nations carers, can be monitored, measured, and addressed.
- Redefine the Australian Government policy definitions of 'work' to include the unpaid care work that Australians undertake, such as childcare, elderly care, care of country, and community work, so that it is visible and valued.
- Recognise the role that policy can have in providing strong social services, good infrastructure, and gender equality as a priority, to increase the level of women's workforce participation and economic security.

<sup>26</sup> Elise Klein, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Submission to the Senate Select Committee in Work and Care, 2023

<sup>27</sup> Elise Klein, Unpaid care, welfare conditionality and expropriation, Gender, Work and Organization, Volume 28 Issue 4, 2023, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gwao.12679>

<sup>28</sup> The Grattan Institute, Cheaper childcare: A practical plan to boost female workforce participation, 2020, pg. 6

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market, 2016, pg. 3  
<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/australian-unpaid-care-work-and-the-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> The Grattan Institute, Cheaper childcare: A practical plan to boost female workforce participation, 2020, pg. 6

<sup>32</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market, 2016, pg. 3  
<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/australian-unpaid-care-work-and-the-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Western Australia, Grandparent carer statistics, 2023  
<https://www.grandparentsraisinggrandchildren.org.au/campaign/#:~:text=The%20majority%20of%20grandparent%20carers,less%20than%20%2419%2C000%20per%20year.>

- Publish ABS data on labour force participation incentives and obstacles more often. Additionally, this work attempts to enlighten readers on obstacles faced by women, unpaid carers, people with disability, the elderly, First Nations peoples, individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and people living in rural and remote communities.
- Strengthen government gender equality policies to normalise and encourage shared caring responsibilities in families and communities, and actively reduce the barriers that women face in balancing paid employment and unpaid caring responsibilities.